

Lesson 12 - 15 January 2012.

The Altar by Jordan

Lesson Scope: [Joshua 22](#)

Lesson Focus

Prior to the conquest of Canaan, Moses had led Israel to victory over several kings east of the Jordan River. Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh approached Moses with the request that they be allowed to settle in this area because of its suitability for grazing cattle. Moses agreed after these tribes pledged to send their armed men over Jordan to help their brethren conquer the land of Canaan.

After the other tribes obtained their inheritance, Joshua called the men of these two and one-half tribes and gave them an honorable discharge to return to their families beyond Jordan. He charged them to love the Lord and to keep His law.

These men feared that the natural barrier of the Jordan River might eventually cause their descendants to be separated from the rest of God's people. They decided to build a symbolic altar on the bank of the river to clearly identify them with the worship of Jehovah. The other tribes rashly concluded that the tribes east of the Jordan had built an altar upon which to offer sacrifices. This reaction brought the tribes to the brink of civil war. God's people face many situations that test their commitment to truth and to each other. But God has given ample direction for them "to dwell together in unity."

This is a practical lesson in interpersonal relationships. Situations vary, but human nature responds the same and the principles demonstrated in this lesson are valid today. The zeal of the nine and one-half tribes for the worship of God is commendable even though they acted rashly. Their subsequent history would have been much better if they had maintained this fervor. Also note how quickly they dropped their accusations when they learned the truth. This proves that the delegation was really interested in finding out the truth. Also note the generous offer they made to the eastern tribes in verse 19.

Lesson Aim: To present principles related to brotherhood responsibility.

Theme Verse: [Romans 14:19](#). Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

Lesson Text:

Rumor

[Joshua 22:9-12](#) ⁹ And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh returned, and departed from the children of Israel out of Shiloh, which *is* in the land of Canaan, to go unto the country of Gilead, to the land of their possession, whereof they were possessed, according to the word of the LORD by the hand of Moses. ¹⁰ And when they came unto the borders of Jordan, that *are* in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by Jordan, a great altar to see to. ¹¹ And the children of Israel heard say, Behold, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh have built an altar over against the land of Canaan, in the borders of Jordan, at the passage of the children of Israel. ¹² And when the children of Israel heard *of it*, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together at Shiloh, to go up to war against them.

Response

[Joshua 22:13-16](#) ¹³ And the children of Israel sent unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the half tribe of Manasseh, into the land of Gilead, Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, ¹⁴ And with him ten princes, of each chief house a prince throughout all the tribes of Israel; and each one *was* an head of the house of their fathers among the thousands of Israel. ¹⁵ And they came unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the half tribe of Manasseh, unto the land of Gilead, and they spake with them, saying, ¹⁶ Thus saith the whole congregation of the LORD, What trespass *is* this that ye have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following the LORD, in that ye have builded you an altar, that ye might rebel this day against the LORD? [Joshua 22:21-28](#) ²¹ Then the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh answered, and said unto the heads of the thousands of Israel, ²² The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know; if *it be* in rebellion, or if in transgression against the LORD, (save us not this day,) ²³ That we have built us an altar to turn from following the LORD, or if to offer thereon burnt offering

or meat offering, or if to offer peace offerings thereon, let the LORD himself require *it*; ²⁴ And if we have not *rather* done it for fear of *this* thing, saying, In time to come your children might speak unto our children, saying, What have ye to do with the LORD God of Israel? ²⁵ For the LORD hath made Jordan a border between us and you, ye children of Reuben and children of Gad; ye have no part in the LORD: so shall your children make our children cease from fearing the LORD. ²⁶ Therefore we said, Let us now prepare to build us an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice: ²⁷ But *that it may be* a witness between us, and you, and our generations after us, that we might do the service of the LORD before him with our burnt offerings, and with our sacrifices, and with our peace offerings; that your children may not say to our children in time to come, Ye have no part in the LORD. ²⁸ Therefore said we, that it shall be, when they should *so* say to us or to our generations in time to come, that we may say *again*, Behold the pattern of the altar of the LORD, which our fathers made, not for burnt offerings, nor for sacrifices; but it *is* a witness between us and you.

Rest

Joshua 22:30 ³⁰ And when Phinehas the priest, and the princes of the congregation and heads of the thousands of Israel which *were* with him, heard the words that the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the children of Manasseh spake, it pleased them.

Questions for Study

Rumor

1. Why did the children of Israel react so strongly to this rumor?
2. What can be done to minimize misunderstandings in the brotherhood?
3. What are some present-day threats to pure worship?

Response

4. Was the fear expressed by the eastern tribes justified?
5. How is humility evident in the response of the two and one-half tribes?
6. How can we ensure that we will not become estranged from God's people?
7. How are tangible links to the godly of the past an aid in maintaining the faith?

Rest

8. What blessings result from restored unity?

Analyzing the Passage

The altar built by the Jordan River was symbolic only; it was not designed for actual use (Joshua 22:28). The phrase "a great altar to see to" (Joshua 22:10) indicates that it was of monumental size, visible from a distance.

The children of Israel were right to be alarmed about the rumor they heard (Joshua 22:11). But God had outlined the proper procedure in Deuteronomy 13:12-16. First they were to "enquire, and make search, and ask diligently" about the reported false worship; and then "if it be truth," they were to "surely smite" those who were guilty. In this case, they gathered for war before enquiring.

The tribes east of Jordan were not necessarily being accused of worshipping other gods. The alleged crime was that of offering sacrifice to God in an unauthorized place. God had commanded that all sacrifices were to be made at the tabernacle (Leviticus 17:8-9). At this time, the tabernacle resided in Shiloh.

The two and one-half tribes declared their innocence in the strongest terms possible. The twice-repeated phrase "the LORD God of gods" (Joshua 22:22) invokes the witness of the Lord God Jehovah.

The tribes east of Jordan were concerned that, in future generations, the western tribes would disown them as the people of God (Joshua 22:24). Perhaps they should have been more concerned that their posterity might initiate a departure from the true God.

Principles and Applications

Rumor

1. Brotherhood responsibility requires that all fill their proper places within the group (Joshua 22:9). These men had dutifully fought alongside their brethren in Canaan; now they returned to their responsibilities as heads of their families. Each member of the brotherhood has a role to fill, and should sense his personal accountability to do so. A father does not help the cause if he is so encumbered by the work of the church that he neglects his own family. Some responsibilities may be shared; some are ours alone.
2. Brethren should feel responsible to consider carefully how their actions might appear to others (Joshua 22:10). We naturally believe that our motives are pure and should be self-evident to others. However, for smooth brotherhood relationships, we must attempt to understand how others may view our actions. Sharing our intentions beforehand may eliminate undue

suspicions. We must also be open to the possibility that we are deceived as to our own motives.

3. Judging motives because of hearsay and dealing with issues in haste are irresponsible responses (Joshua 22:11-12). "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him" (Proverbs 18:13). It is natural, upon hearing a rumor, to quickly analyze the situation and confidently assign motives to the action. Brotherly love demands that we give our brother the benefit of the doubt and seek to verify what we heard. The Bible way calls for us to go directly to the one in question for information rather than gossiping about the matter to others. In this way, many misunderstandings can be avoided.

Response

4. Leaders among God's people are responsible to initiate diligent, orderly efforts to resolve misunderstanding (Joshua 22:13-16). Phinehas, a priest zealous for the purity of worship, headed a delegation of tribal leaders. In the church, God has ordained leaders to give direction. When misunderstandings cannot be resolved at the personal level, the leaders bear responsibility to effect peace.

5. When suspicions have arisen, a calm and forthright sharing of the facts usually brings rest (Joshua 22:21-24). An evasive, defensive response will heighten suspicions and escalate tensions. The carnal desire to counterattack must be crucified. Even when the charges seem ridiculous, a clear explanation of the facts should be given. A blameless life is the best answer to false accusations.

6. A willingness to deal with wrongdoing, regardless who the offender is, builds brotherhood confidence (Joshua 22:22-23). The identity of the offender dare not influence one's view of the offense. Partiality in dealing with wrongdoing destroys confidence and provides soil for the root of bitterness. Truth must be the standard by which all are judged.

7. Those who sense their responsibility to the brotherhood take steps to preserve the faith for future generations (Joshua 22:24, 28). Each generation is the link between the faithful of past and future generations. Preserving the faith is not accomplished by collecting and displaying artifacts that have been owned by faithful ancestors. This can make one feel good, but it does nothing to perpetuate the faith. Wholeheartedly embracing a Biblical lifestyle that is guided by the proven applications of the past is the most effective means of preserving the faith.

Rest

8. Resolving tensions within the brotherhood brings rest (Joshua 22:30). God desires that the brotherhood would experience the rest of harmonious relationships. We must be careful that truth is not compromised for the sake of peace. Genuine rest is found only when truth is the basis for unity.

Important Teachings

1. Brotherhood responsibility requires that all fill their proper places within the group (Joshua 22:9).
2. Brethren should feel responsible to consider carefully how their actions might appear to others (Joshua 22:10).
3. Judging motives because of hearsay and dealing with issues in haste are irresponsible responses (Joshua 22:11-12).
4. Leaders among God's people are responsible to initiate diligent, orderly efforts to resolve misunderstanding (Joshua 22:13-16).
5. When suspicions have arisen, a calm and forthright sharing of the facts usually brings rest (Joshua 22:21-24).
6. A willingness to deal with wrongdoing, regardless who the offender is, builds brotherhood confidence (Joshua 22:22-23).
7. Those who sense their responsibility to the brotherhood take steps to preserve the faith for future generations (Joshua 22:24, 28).
8. Resolving tensions within the brotherhood brings rest (Joshua 22:30).

Answers to Questions

1. Why did the children of Israel react so strongly to this rumor?

The strength and cohesion of the tribes of Israel were based on their common worship of God. The Law clearly spelled out the acceptable methods of worship. Any deviation was to be severely punished.

2. What can be done to minimize misunderstandings in the brotherhood?

Each member is responsible to evaluate how his actions may appear to his brethren. An atmosphere of trust will greatly minimize occasions for misunderstanding to develop. Openness about our life will also eliminate many misunderstandings. Even in the closest relationships, misunderstandings will never be totally eliminated.

3. What are some present-day threats to pure worship?

A casual attitude and appearance in worship services is a threat to the reverence demanded by a holy God. Wandering thoughts will prevent us from

truly entering into worship. The quest for entertainment and diversity in worship patterns must be resisted. The preaching of the Word must remain primary in our worship services.

4. Was the fear expressed by the eastern tribes justified?

Yes, there was a real danger that they would become detached from the main body of Israelites. They were separated by the Jordan River and surrounded by heathen nations. However, they were wrong in believing that the primary danger lay in the other tribes' disowning them. The real danger was that they would fail to go to the tabernacle regularly to worship and thus become estranged from the people of God.

5. How is humility evident in the response of the two and one-half tribes? They did not retort angrily to the false charges. They openly explained their intentions and made no counteraccusations.

6. How can we ensure that we will not become estranged from God's people?

We must clearly identify with God's people. This involves fully supporting the church and not being ashamed of a separated identity. We must meet our social needs within the context of the brotherhood, not among ungodly or nominal Christian associates. Material pursuits need to be subservient to spiritual goals.

7. How are tangible links to the godly of the past an aid in maintaining the faith?

We are creatures of influence. Although everyone must personally choose to serve God, we certainly recognize the value of godly homelife and Biblical training in helping the oncoming generations embrace the faith. The writings of those who have been faithful are helpful in illuminating current issues.

8. What blessings result from restored unity?

A powerful witness goes forth from a unified brotherhood. Energy that was being consumed by internal conflict can be focused on the great cause of Christ's kingdom. It provides conditions suitable for Christian growth.

Summarizing the Lesson

An unthinking action can quickly lead to misunderstanding and tension. But our feelings must be subordinated to the facts. Healthy communication is the key to resolving difficulties. Through Christian love and forbearance, harmonious interpersonal relationships can be a reality.

Research Guide

1. Read Deuteronomy 13 to better understand the situation in this lesson.
2. Read Matthew 18:15-20 and meditate on how the principles given in this passage help to resolve interpersonal problems in the brotherhood.